Encore

Otis Blackwell

An Interview By:

Danny McCue

"Don't Be Cruel"

"The Fever"

If you take the narrow view of contemporary pop and rock culture, the world as we know it began the day that a Memphis record producer first expressed his desire to find a "White boy who could sing black," and while there's plenty of evidence to suggest rock and roll would've happened anyway, that it was in fact happening in exuberant abundance all over an America that was unwilling to listen, that notion still remains a potent one. It also negates the contributions of a startling number of black and Hispanic musicians, among them a country-tinged rhythm and blues singer and songwriter named Otis Blackwell.

Sam Phillips found his singer the day that Elvis Presley walked into the offices of the Memphis Recording Service. That was also the day that the paths of Otis Blackwell and Presley started to move towards each other in such a way that they would achieve their greatest sucesses together and yet, never meet.

Blackwell's is the pen behind such unforgettable Presley hits as "Don't Be Cruel," "All Shook Up," and "Return To Sender," the success of which prompted other performers, both black and white, to request Blackwell material for their own recording sessions. Jerry Lee Lewis recorded "Great Balls of Fire" and "Breathless," Carl Perkins did his "Hollywood City," and Little Willie John got "The Fever." So enduring has the Blackwell catalog proved to be, that remakes of his earlier hits still climb into the Billboard top forty. James Taylor did it a few years ago with "Handyman" and you'd have to live in Antarctica not to know what Cheap Trick did with "Don't Be Cruel" as recently as last summer.

Perhaps equally important to the history of Pop music since the 1950's is the impact that Otis Blackwell the singer had on the artists who recorded his songs. Elvis Presley's vocal stylings on what are arguably two of his biggest hits are straight transcriptions of what Blackwell sang on the demo records. In so much that the singer is defined by the song and how he sings it, Otis Blackwell may well have defined white rock and roll up to the advent of the Beatles.

However you look at it, the Brooklyn native casts a long shadow over the first rock and roll era, and amazingly, he's still writing in the very same room where he wrote those 'classics' 25 to thirty years ago. We spoke on a recent Wednesday afternoon.

continued on next page

"All Shook Up"

Interview

Otis Blackwell

continued

"Great Balls Of Fire"

"Handyman"

"Breathless"

DM: When you're writing a song, moving from line to line, how would you keep the continuity together, as far as what the idea behind the lyrics were saying?

OB: How? How did I keep it?

DM: Yeah, I mean, it wasn't just a case of saying, 'Well, this line sounds good with this line,' was it?

OB: Oh God, Jesus, I don't know how to put this...but I never thought about it. I just think about a subject and try to keep everything in the pocket of it. Of course, there are certain lines that should go before others, you make an opening and closing statement, but I didn't think about that when I started writing–I do now, but back then it was a whole different ball game.

DM: Is it usually an idea that you come up with, rather than having a line pop into your head?

OB: Well, I usually get my ideas from comic books and the Sunday comics, that's where a lot of the titles come from and I usually get the title and go from there.

DM: How did you develop your skill with words, are they something you feel you have a natural affinity for?

OB: Actually, it started while I was working with a music publisher by the name of Hal Fine at Roosevelt music. He used to have this fellow by the name of Charlie Singleton, a writer who did things like "Strangers in the Night" and went mostly for the big acts, the good acts like Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra. That was his ballgame, while I preferred the rock stuff, and it was while hanging around that office and seeing how fellows like Singleton wrote, that I found out how to do it. I found out it was better to have simple, clean, but well-written lyrics that could be understood by a kid if he read them.

DM: Have you heard the Cheap Trick version of "Don't Be Cruel"?

OB: Yeah, I love it. I feel that they did a really good job because they stayed in the pocket and yet it was just a little different. I was really surprised when I heard it.

DM: Did they contact you before they released it?

OB: No, in fact, I guess the whole world knew it was out before I heard about it. I'm usually the last one to know these things. I remember when James Taylor did "Handyman," a group of friends asked if I had heard it and I said, 'Oh my God, no man, who is James Taylor?' and this time it was, 'Did you hear Cheap Trick' 'No, what about Cheap Trick?' "Don't Be Cruel" I said (groans), because a lot of times, when an artist records a song that Elvis did, they get a lot of hate mail. "What are you trying to do, kill the image of Elvis?" That kind of thing. So I thought, 'here it goes again,' but I guess it was so good...

DM: Were you conscious from the beginning that what you were writing was rock and roll, or did you just see it as your interpretation of Rhythm and Blues?

OB: Well, I'll tell you, I was just writing. I knew it was different from R&B because friends I had said, 'Man, we don't sing that kind of thing' and I couldn't understand what they meant. I knew it wasn't blues and it wasn't rhythm and blues, but it wasn't until after hearing Jerry Lee Lewis that I realized that it had a little country thing to it. Then I began to understand. Up until then I used to hate just about everybody that turned my stuff down (laughs).

DM: Now we've already talked about titles, what inspires a storyline?

OB: Well now, I've been around long enough now that I can make just about any title fit any part of life, just about anything that was happening in my life or things that I've seen. What I used to do, a lot of times, was consciously strive to keep them clean, especially when I was doing things for Elvis-all those things had to do with girls and were always speaking from a positive point of view, nothing negative, it's a little different now.

DM: The fact that you never met Elvis figures in all the articles I've ever read about you, but what I'd like to close this interview with are some of the memories you have of thepeople you did meet?

OB: Generally speaking, I did not believe in meeting the artists who recorded my songs, because of the politics involved in the business. Y'know, an artist might promise a friend he'll record his song and then come to find that he can't do it for all kinds of reasons, and the next thing you know, they aren't friends anymore. I just figured that if a publisher advanced me the money for a song, the politics was his job.

But I've met Jerry Lee. I did a show with him a couple of years ago. He was a nice dude. He's real nice, I mean, he was nice to me, y'know, you hear things...I can see why they say he's crazy (laughs). I met Mahalia Jackson-I did a session with her. Jimmie Jones, "Handyman," now that was a demo that we recorded for someone else that the record company decided to put out after we did it. In fact, I whistle on it because the flute player didn't show up and I figured, 'It's just a demo, what the heck?' And they put it out just like that, it just goes to show that in this business, you never can tell...

COMING SOON:

Bo Diddley
Robyn Hitchcock
New York Stories
Jon Butcher
The Reivers